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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by describing the competing priorities and problems its author/educator encounters when trying to take care of business in the writing center. The paper moves from discussing her firsthand experiences as a scholar interested in both professional writing and the writing center to a study she and a friend did about tutor perceptions of "good business writing." It concludes with a possible solution or two perceived from the other side of the fence--that is, from the colleges over in the school of business. Through a survey of perspectives, the paper seeks to structure some of the questions that inform the potentially competing priorities of the business writer and the writing tutor. (NKA)

Nobody's Business? Professional Writing and the Politics of Correctness.

by Melissa Janetta

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Nobody's Business?: Professional Writing and the Politics of Correctness

Before we begin, I'd like to introduce you to the individuals who will be speaking to you today: we have Melissa Ianetta, a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Composition with a six year career in writing centers, who's concerned with the product-over-process approach she's seen in those students who come to her for help with professional documents. Next, we have Melissa Ianetta, a business writing teacher who constantly stresses to her students the importance of flawless business writing – particularly in resumes, cover letters, grad school applications and the like – and who urges students not only to proofread these items carefully but also to seek out a fresh set of eyes before sending off these life shaping documents. Finally, speaking to you about the problematic nature of business writing in the writing center is . . . Melissa Ianetta, formerly a manager in a highly competitive field, she has firsthand knowledge of the impulse experienced when facing a hundred resumes for a single job; that is, the strategy of reading until given any reason to stop. And topping this list is often mechanical error.

I'm sorry if this multiple introduction seems like a confusing way to introduce a single speaker – me – but, as I'm sure you can imagine, carrying these competing priorities is similarly disorienting. And so what I'd like to talk to you about are the problems that seem to inevitably arise when I try to take care of business, so to speak, in the writing center. I'll be moving from my firsthand experiences as a scholar interested

in both professional writing and the writing center to a study I and a friend did a while ago about tutor perceptions of “good business writing” and I’ll conclude with a possible solution or two as perceived from the other fence – that is, from our colleges over in the school of business. Through a survey of perspectives, then, I’d like to try to structure some of the questions that inform the potentially competing priorities of the business writer and the writing tutor if not attempt to solve these dilemmas in the eighteen minutes I have left.

“Not better papers, better writers.” A beloved if well-worn motto of many writing centers, this phrase sums up the cross-purposes that seem to be the problematic nexus of many professional writing tutorials. The writing consultant (that’s me) is invested in the notion of assisting the student to improve his or her writing skills, while the client (that’s them) is concerned with the exigency, which, when writing a resume and cover letter is often the first “real-life” rhetorical situation in which the student becomes invested. Speaking from my own experiences as a writing consultant, client anxieties tend to run high in this situation – after all, this is where you can’t “settle” for a lower grade; it’s pass-fail in that you get the job or you don’t.

When one is writing for the job market, phobias can be expressed in a variety of ways. As a way of structuring my personal experience, I’d like to give you three snapshots of common scenarios I’ve seen along the spectrum of the composing process and the ways in which I’ve addressed each -- with, admittedly, varying success. Perhaps one of the most common – and for me, one of the most painful to witness – is the quandary that hits students at the most preliminary inventional stage. These are the students who – sometimes sheepishly, sometimes tearfully – inform you that they have

nothing – literally nothing – to offer an employer. In this case, I seem to spend a noticeable portion of the tutorial just calming them down and the rest of it walking them through inventional questions. Often, the problem at this stage isn't the students' total lack of pertinent experience; rather they have no real understanding of the professional conversation they are trying to enter. That is, they have no idea what "counts." At this stage, it helps if the tutor has been familiarized with the various forms of resumes (skills vs. chronological, for example) and the sorts of general skills that an employer will look for in a new college grad (like the ability to communicate for instance or evidence of collaborative skills). Usually, a tutorial dealing with a client in this fundamental stage of the composing process takes the form of a brainstorming session. At the end, the would-be employee goes away with some handouts, some preliminary ideas, and a sense of reassurance, if not complete contentment, that composing a job package cannot be done in one sitting. And, as I've repeatedly assured job seekers, I have yet to meet anyone without at least SOMETHING to put on a resume.

The next issue in the compositional process of business communication – and offering a nice contrast to the previous scenario – is the "I'm-not-going-to-rewrite-it-I-just-want-to-fix-it." In the less successful tutorials, this give me the feeling of watching Wily Coyote walk of a cliff in the Road Runner cartoons – you know what's going to happen is going to be painful, but you just can't stop it. This is the student who may enter the tutorial thinking (a) "I hate writing this document and the sooner it's off my desk the sooner I can stop worrying about it and get a job," (b) "This person is a writing tutor and will have no notion of the professional discourse of food sciences or electrical engineering or fashion and textiles" or, finally, (c) "Style doesn't matter in a job package,

as long as everything is spelled right, no one is going to care how or where I put things.” Thus, these clients want their materials – often crawling with rhetorical mis-steps – simply fixed grammatically.

In this situation, I find it’s important to establish my professional ethos before moving into the documents. By talking about the plethora of job packages I’ve seen both in the academy and out of it, I can usually convince them to at least hear out my predictions on audience reaction to their approach. From here I move to – and perhaps this is more pertinent for those tutors who may have less administrative experience to draw upon – the position of audience and attempt to persuade the prospective job-seeker that, even in a document as ostensibly concise as a resume, style and substance cannot be separated. Through a “when you say X I hear Y” analysis I can, more often than not, convince them we need to work on revision before we get to the proofreading stage.

And it is at this proofreading stage that I – as well as other tutors I’ve known – run into trouble. That is, if “Not just better papers, better writers” is the first credo of the writing center, “We don’t proofread” often runs a close second. And yet, job materials, in order to be successful, are going to have to be proofread. But I – like many others, I’m sure – have a long ingrained antipathy for copyediting student papers. This conflict, in fact, led to the genesis of this paper. Yet when I turned for its composition to that body of scholarship most influential as on me as a tutor, I realized for the first time that the rhetorical situation that is addressed in much Writing Center scholarship is the traditional tutor-writer-teacher triad. When I went back to Jeff Brooks’ “Minimalist Tutoring,” for example – an essay that was, by the way, instrumental in my own development of successful tutoring strategies – I realized that his approach is predicated on the notion that

the writing seen in the writing center is not “real world;” indeed it exists in contrast to professional writing. Brooks writes:

While student writings are text, they are unlike other texts in one important way: the process is far more important than the product. Most “real-world” writing has a goal beyond the page; anything that can be done to that writing to make it more effective ought to be done. Student writing, on the other hand, has no real goal beyond getting it on the page. In the real world when you need to have something important written “perfectly,” you hire a professional writer’ when a student hires a professional writer it is called plagiarism. (85)

If, in the real world, you hire a professional writer (a contention with which, incidentally, I highly disagree) exactly who does the aspiring professional hire? Along with helping the applicant with the situation into which he writes and assisting him with marshaling the evidence of his fitness for employment, is it our job to intervene in the text on the proofreading level? I received some food for thought on this matter from Joan Hawthorne’s essay “‘We don’t proofread here’: Re-visioning the Writing Center to better Meet Student Needs.” Hawthorne offers a thoughtful analysis of the variety of possible meanings of the term “proofread,” and discusses those times in which copy-editing strategies can be useful in a tutorial. And yet, when viewed through the rhetorical lens of a student’s entrance into the professional writing situation, Hawthorne’s take on Directive Tutoring has its limits. That is, as she delineates on a handout distributed to her tutors that is included in her article, “If students leave the conference (a) with a slightly better paper, (b) as a slightly better writers, and (c) feeling comfortable with the center and likely to return so you can continue the work that was begun, you’ve had a ‘good enough’

conference” (6). Despite their disparate visions of proofreading and directive tutoring, then, both Hawthorne and Brooks approaches seem designed for the graded classroom.

So where does this leave me – or, more importantly, those students I’ve assisted with their job materials? Not in an axiomatically consistent place, I’ll admit, nor in one with which I’m particularly easy. But, yes, there are times when I’ve fixed a prospecting letter when -- pen in hand -- I’ve zipped through unsplicing those commas and tucking in those stray dangling modifiers. But this only happens after the student and I have – usually over a span of sessions – worked through a variety of other issues and only after we’ve talked about proofreading strategies that she’s then applied to her document. At that point, I can’t ethically refuse to give her the document the same once –over I’m often called on to give to my peers’ materials.

From invention to drafting to proofreading, then, to me the business writing tutorial seems a special case calling for a differently attenuated awareness on the tutor’s part. This impression aligns with a small study of tutor strategies I conducted last year with a colleague – Lori Ostergaard, a Ph.D. student in composition at Illinois State. To give you a quick run-down of the set-up of our project: we surveyed the writing center tutors at two sites: graduate writing center consultants at a large research I university and undergraduate tutors at a mid-sized state college. All study participants were given three sets of job materials and were asked to respond as if these were brought in by an undergraduate job seeker. About half of the tutors at each site responded, giving us a total of twelve sets of responses or thirty-six job packages. After receiving this information, we attempted to chart trends in response and presented the results of this study last year at ABC, the Association for Business Communication’s national

conference. To briefly touch upon some of the results pertinent to our discussion today, we discovered that, at both institutions there were concerns with – in order of frequency

- the amount of information included (this includes concerns that the writer isn't explaining herself fully and repeated warnings that business writing is short)
- also, a concern with the “right” way to set up professional documents,
- but most intriguingly, little grammatical commentary.

In other words, tutors at both sites respond to the substance of the materials but not to that surface error that usually would prevent these individuals from receiving serious attention in the job market. Most likely, the “No Proofreading” policy on which I was weaned as an undergraduate tutor is likewise shaping the behavior of others. But if we refuse to “fix” – and, yes, this choice of terms *is* intentional – those errors our clients are unable to see, what use is there in the most carefully crafted rhetorical masterwork they can devise?

The frustration with situation isn't isolated to tutors and clients. When I presented this information, several people -- both immediately after my paper and in later conversation -- expressed to me their frustration that the writing center wasn't giving these students what they need. After all, it was reasoned to me repeatedly, if students can't get this help at the writing center, where ARE they to get it?

The answers at which our colleagues over in business have arrived when facing the conflict between our pedagogical goals and their students professional aspirations range from the cranky – those individuals who want to turn a conversation about what to do with our students now into a harangue about what the English Department or the High Schools or Parents should have done before – to the innovative. In the latter category, least one faculty member who I talked with at the business communication conference I

just mentioned told me about the Writing Center her school of business had set up, which sounded like, for her department, a resounding success. The tutors are hired directly from the English Graduate students and are trained specifically to deal with the business writing genre. While she was detailing this program to me, however, I found myself wondering if, in fact, we at the writing center aren't missing a chance for our students and ourselves. Were we able to engage our business colleagues – whose coffers tend to be deeper than the often chronically underfunded Writing Centers – in a conversation about creating an approach to these documents that satisfies the clients dual needs as job seekers and as writers, couldn't we not only improve the position of the writing center but also – at least, as the utopic vision looks in my head – get our Business counterparts to back up their desire for tutorly expertise in business writing with some sort of fiscal commitment? At the very least, I believe, business schools will be willing to provide the materials and training to help us meet our students' needs better, which is the goal of everyone involved.

As I promised you at the beginning of this presentation, we've moved from my experiences as a tutor to the broader perspective I've gained through the examination of other tutoring sites. Rather than attempt to leave you with any answers, however, I'd like to leave you with an open question: What should be the business of business in the writing center? And what happens when the philosophies of writing centers encounter the need for correctness in a tutorial concerned with professional writing? That is, are these documents our business? Thank you.

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